CHAPTER 10

Class and Inequality

Learning Objectives

- Describe anthropological theories about the origins of inequality in human groups.
- Apply the theories of key thinkers on class and inequality to real-life situations.
- Explain systems of class and inequality in the United States.
- Analyze how systems of class and inequality operate globally.

In January 2016, National Guard troops deployed to Flint, Michigan, to distribute bottled water to residents who had suffered unsafe water flowing out of their taps for nearly two years. In April 2014, the emergency manager appointed by Michigan's governor to tackle Flint's fiscal crisis had switched the city's source of drinking water from Lake Huron to the highly corrosive and historically polluted Flint River as a cost-saving measure. The city's failure to implement corrosion control measures then caused lead to leach out of aging water pipes into residents' drinking water.

Despite Flint residents' widespread complaints and public protests of foul-smelling, orange-brown water, rashes, hair loss, abdominal pains, and other health problems, city and state officials offered assurances that the water was safe to drink. It was not. Only after a Flint pediatrician, Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, and researchers from Virginia Tech in September 2015 reported widespread incidents of children testing positive for elevated

lead levels did officials begin to react—and then only after more weeks of denial. Lead is a known neurotoxin, and lead poisoning can severely affect children's physical and mental development. Its effects are irreversible.

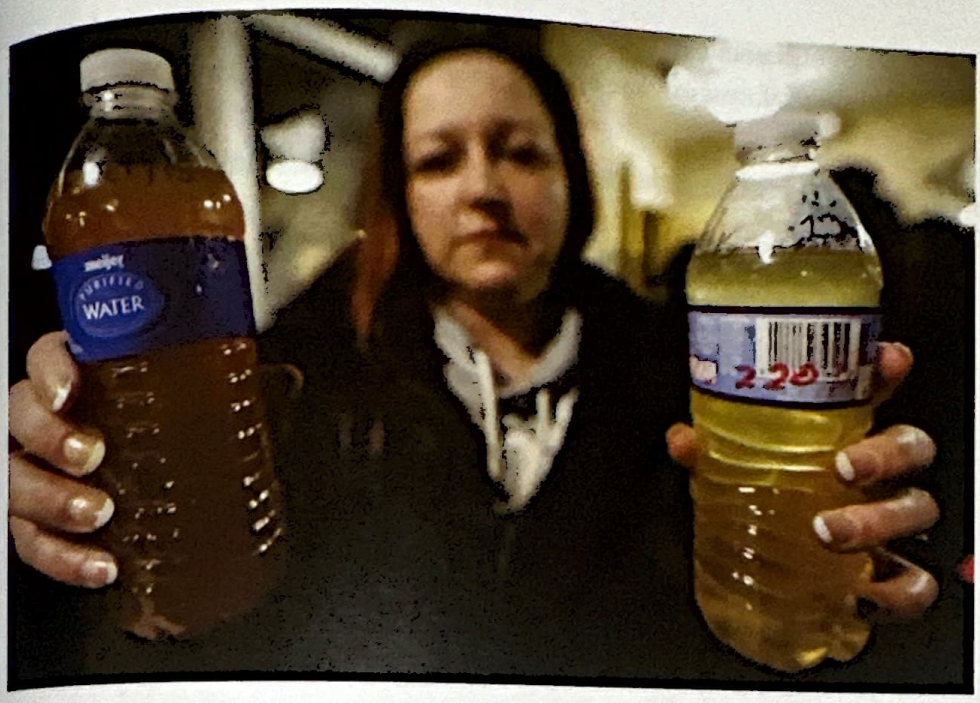
Under mounting pressure, officials returned Flint's water supply to its Lake Huron source in October 2015. But Flint residents concerned with continued contamination from lead water pipes continued their daily routine of using bottled water for drinking, cooking, and bathing. The long-term effects of Flint's public health emergency are still coming to light.

How could such a water crisis—more often associated with megacities in the Global South—occur in one of the wealthiest countries in the world? What made Flint particularly vulnerable? And how does understanding class as a system of inequality, particularly as it intersects with race, help us analyze what happened?

Flint, about an hour's drive north of Detroit, was once a prosperous working-class city at the center of the Industrial Revolution. Birthplace of General Motors and the United Automobile Workers union, its population peaked at almost 200,000 in 1960, and as late as 1978, GM employed nearly 80,000 city residents. But over the next forty years, Flint was gutted by deindustrialization and flexible accumulation as GM relocated jobs overseas in search of cheaper wages, fewer environmental restrictions, lower taxes, and greater profits. Today, Flint is one of the country's poorest cities. Its population, predominately Black, had dropped to just under 81,000 by 2020, and fewer than 5,500 GM jobs remain. The city's poverty rate is more than 39 percent, and its median household income is $28,834.

MAP 10.1
Flint

Flint's water crisis, a story that is repeating itself across the United States in towns like Benton Harbor, Michigan, makes visible lines of class and racial inequality. As anthropologists have long noted (Wittfogel 1957), the circulation of water is not a strictly natural process involving oceans, lakes, streams, evaporation, clouds, and rain. Increasingly, the circulation of water intersects with human systems of power to become a *hydro-social process*. Nature intersects with dams, canals, irrigation systems, pipes, pumps, faucets, drains, and sewers. Technicians manage its circulation. Politicians allocate resources for its infrastructure. On a global scale, the distribution of water reveals the distribution of social power along intersecting lines of class, race, gender, and age (Harvey 1996, 2003). Who has access to it, controls its flow, and organizes its distribution? According to the United Nations and the World Health Organization, 844 million people in the world lack access to safe drinking water, 2 billion people use a water source contaminated by fecal matter, from which 361,000 children under age five die each year (World Health Organization, 2018). In Flint, the hydro-social process, namely the government's failure to invest in water infrastructure while prioritizing cost saving over health, led to the poisoning of the city's water supply.



Flint resident and community activist LeeAnne Walters shows polluted water samples from her home in January 2015, ten months before officials publicly acknowledged the citywide problem. How has class intersected with race, gender, and age to bring about this crisis?

The water crisis in Flint offers particular insights into the complicated workings of class and inequality in U.S. culture. Of all the systems of stratification and power, class may be the most difficult to see clearly and discuss openly. In previous chapters, we have considered stratification along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. In this chapter, we will explore the systems of class and inequality that exist in the United States and elsewhere: how they are constructed, how class intersects with race and gender, and how inequality affects individuals' life chances.

By **class** we refer to a system of power based on wealth, income, and status that creates an unequal distribution of a society's resources—usually moving wealth steadily upward into the hands of an elite. Systems of class stratify individuals' life chances and affect their possibilities for upward and downward social mobility.

class: A system of power based on wealth, income, and status that creates an unequal distribution of a society's resources.

In this chapter we will consider the following questions:

- Is inequality a natural part of human culture?
- How do anthropologists analyze class and inequality?
- How are class and inequality constructed in the United States?
- How are class and inequality constructed globally?

By the end of this chapter, you will better understand how systems of class work and how they affect your life chances and those of others. You may also be better prepared to engage in efforts to change systems of inequality if you so choose. As you prepare for a career in a global economy and a life in this global

age, developing your skills to analyze the effects of class and inequality will prove an essential tool in your anthropological toolkit.

Is Inequality a Natural Part of Human Culture?

» Describe anthropological theories about the origins of inequality in human groups.

stratification: The uneven distribution of resources and privileges among members of a group or culture.

Inequality exists in every contemporary culture, though it may be organized in very different ways. Each society develops its own patterns of **stratification** that differentiate people into groups or classes. Such categories serve as the basis for unequal access to wealth, power, resources, privileges, and status. As discussed in other chapters, these systems of power and stratification may include race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, kinship, age, legal status, or ability/disability. In addition, systems of social class create and sustain patterns of inequality that structure the relationships between rich and poor, between the privileged and the less well-off. But are stratification and inequality intrinsic to human culture?

Egalitarian Societies

egalitarian society: A group based on the sharing of resources to ensure success with a relative absence of hierarchy and violence.

As we will consider further in Chapter 11, for thousands of years, until the development of agriculture approximately 10,000 years ago, the primary human economic and social structure was hunting and gathering. This type of structure has tended to promote **egalitarian societies** based on the sharing of resources to ensure group success. Though not all members are equal in egalitarian societies, these societies function with a relative absence of hierarchy and violence within or among groups. Most modern humans who have ever lived have been hunter-gatherers.

reciprocity: The exchange of resources, goods, and services among people of relatively equal status; meant to create and reinforce social ties.

Archaeological evidence suggests that human evolutionary success relied on cooperation and the sharing of food, child-rearing, and hunting-and-gathering responsibilities—not on hierarchy, violence, and aggression. After all, building a system of **reciprocity** in which group members equally share their bounty has long-term benefits for sustaining the group: Members can expect the sharing of one moment to be reciprocated at some other time (Knauft 1991). Although contemporary economic relations tend to be organized around the exchange of money for services, patterns of reciprocity still exist. You may take class notes for someone who returns the favor—reciprocates—at a later date. You may give someone a ride, walk their dog, or share your lunch with the understanding that at some point in the future your favor will be reciprocated. In these instances, members of our extended "group" share their resources of time, food, or other

amenities in ways that advance their individual interests while also working for the long-term benefit of sustaining the group. (See Chapter 11 for a longer discussion of reciprocity.)

Anthropologists have studied egalitarian societies among contemporary hunter-gatherer groups such as the Ju/'hoansi of Africa's Kalahari region (Lee 2003) as well as the Canadian Inuit and the Hadza of Tanzania (Marlowe 2010), among many others (Solway 2006). Efforts to establish more egalitarian systems of economic and social relations have also occurred within highly stratified societies. The Amish (Hostetler 1993) and Hutterite (Hostetler 1997) communities in the United States are good examples on a small scale.

Hutterites, a small Christian sect, live primarily in rural North American communities and make their living mostly through agriculture. They own all property collectively and provide for individual members and families from the community's common resources. Families live in separate homes owned collectively by the community and take their meals in a common dining room. The Amish, also a small North American Christian group, are known for their simple lifestyle and their rejection of labor-saving devices that might make them less reliant on the community. The Amish, while owning private property, maintain a cooperative economic and social structure that revolves around the church and is based heavily on reciprocity. Perhaps the best-known example is the distinctive Amish practice of collective barn raising in which the entire community gathers to rapidly erect a barn for one family, an act of reciprocity that is returned many times over as barns are raised throughout the community over the years.

Reciprocity in action: An Amish community gathers to raise a barn.

Ranked Societies

ranked society: A group in which wealth is not stratified but prestige and status are.

Anthropologists also recognize **ranked societies**: those in which wealth is not stratified but prestige and status are. In these societies, positions of high prestige—such as chief—are largely hereditary. Because only certain individuals can occupy these positions, the social rank of the society is set regardless of the skills, wisdom, or efforts of other members.

Despite their high prestige, chiefs usually do not accumulate great wealth. In fact, a chief's lifestyle and standard of living may not vary significantly from those of any other member of the group. Group members offer gifts of tribute to their chief, but instead of keeping or hoarding these gifts, the chief redistributes them to group members. This act of gift giving—a form of **redistribution**—ensures the chief's prestige while also preserving the well-being of all group members. The chief's rank and status are reinforced not through accumulation of wealth but through reciprocity. Ranked societies have existed in most parts of the world, but anthropologists have most carefully studied those in the islands of the South Pacific (Petersen 2009) and along the Pacific Northwest coast of North America (Boas 1966).

redistribution: A form of exchange in which accumulated wealth is collected from the members of the group and reallocated in a different pattern.

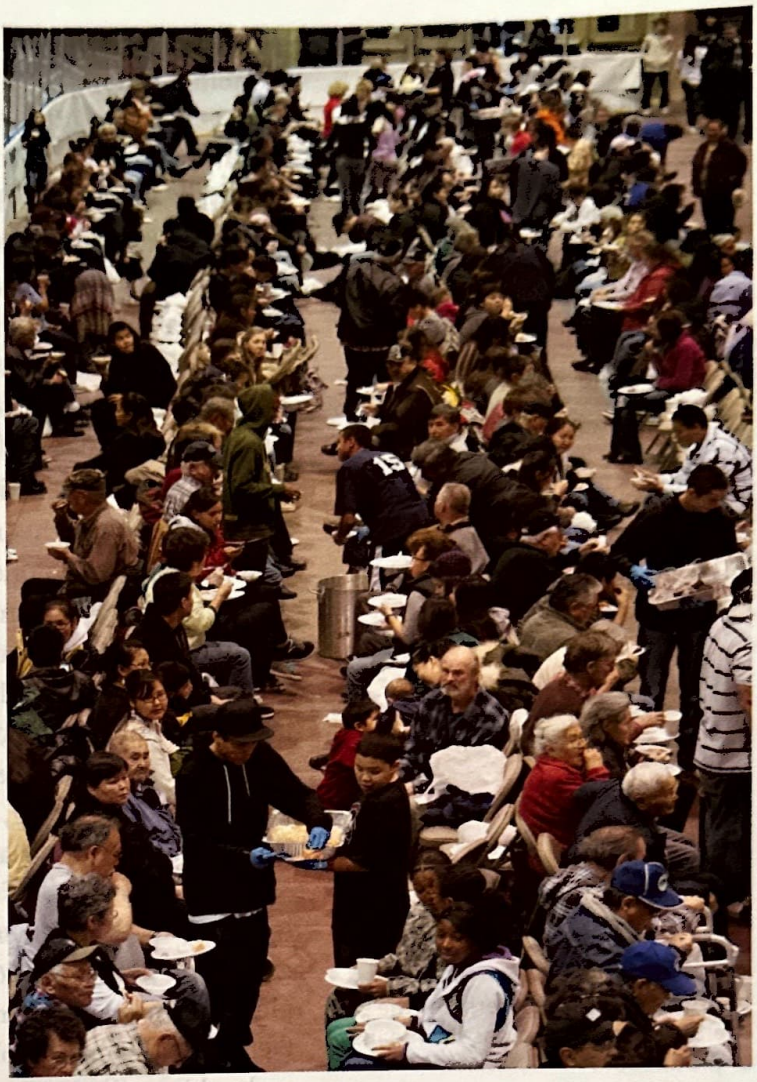
One redistribution ceremony famous in the field of anthropology is the **potlatch** practiced among the Kwakiutl of the Pacific Northwest in the early twentieth century. Among this Native American group, the chief would establish and reestablish claims to prestige and status by holding an elaborate feast and gift-giving ceremony—a potlatch. He would give guests all of his personal possessions, including supplies of food, cooking pots, blankets, weapons, and even boats. What was not given away might be destroyed as a sign of the chief's great capacity. The more elaborate the gift giving, the more status and rank the chief gained in the community. The chief's generosity also applied pressure on his guests to reciprocate in like manner, or even more elaborately in a later ceremony (Boas 1966). In a practical sense, the potlatch served to distribute key community resources of food and clothing broadly among group members. As a ritual ceremony, it represented a tradition among the Kwakiutl and other ranked societies in which social status is established not by wealth and power but by the prestige earned via one's capacity for generosity (Boas 1966). Potlatch practices appear to have intensified as Canadian colonialism introduced capitalist markets and new forms of scarcity into the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And while Indigenous groups continue potlatch ceremonies today, they do so in a greatly transformed economic and cultural context.

potlatch: Elaborate redistribution ceremony practiced among the Kwakiutl of the Pacific Northwest.

Contemporary patterns of cooperation, sharing, collaboration, and reciprocity draw on patterns of behavior that have been central to human evolutionary success over millions of years. In contrast, social patterns of

entrenched hierarchy and stratification emerged much more recently in the human story.

The extreme stratification in today's world is a fairly new development. Anthropologists trace its roots to the rise of intensive agriculture and populous market towns in which relatively small groups of elite merchants and landholders were able to accumulate wealth. Stratification and inequality have become more pronounced in industrialized capitalist economies in recent centuries, and this uneven development appears to be accelerating under the forces of globalization, further concentrating wealth in the hands of the few. Still, countries such as Norway, Sweden, and Denmark have made efforts to narrow stratification through a system of redistribution that combines taxation of wealth with generous social benefits. Even the United States, which has some of the highest levels of economic inequality among advanced economies (World Economic Forum 2018), also uses a progressive tax rate, requiring higher-income earners to pay a moderately higher tax rate with the goal of dispersing the cost burden of government services more equally. Targeted tax benefits for many high-income earners, including significantly lower tax rates on capital gains on investments, create a beneficial regressive tax rate for those at the very top.



Youth served thousands of guests food as part of potlatch, a traditional redistribution ceremony among the Indigenous people of the U.S. Pacific Northwest coast.

How Do Anthropologists Analyze Class and Inequality?

» Apply the theories of key thinkers on class and inequality to real-life situations.

We turn now to consider four key theorists of class and inequality. European social philosophers Karl Marx and Max Weber, writing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the context of the Industrial Revolution, are separated by a century from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and American anthropologist Leith Mullings, whose late twentieth-century writings are

based in the context of a much more complicated and advanced capitalist economic system.

Theories of Class

Each theorist discussed here has responded to the unique social and economic challenges of their time and offers key analytical insights that allow anthropologists today to investigate the realities of class and inequality more deeply. As you read about each theorist, consider how you might apply their key concepts to the social class relationships and inequalities we discussed at the beginning of the chapter in relation to the Flint water crisis.

Karl Marx: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat Karl Marx (1801–1882), perhaps the most widely read theorist of class, wrote against a background of economic change and social upheaval. During the nineteenth century, rapid economic changes and new government policies brought massive social upheaval and dislocation to western Europe. As the Industrial Revolution swept through the region, government policies restricted poor rural families' use of common village lands. (In England, these were called Enclosure Acts because they enclosed the commons.) Deprived of access to land they had depended on for farming, grazing, and gathering, rural people migrated to urban centers to seek jobs in the expanding industrial factories.

Marx's analysis of the increasing inequalities in the emerging capitalist economy of nineteenth-century Europe, described in his *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* (1867), distinguished between two distinct classes of people. The **bourgeoisie**, or capitalist class, owned the **means of production**—the factories, machines, tools, raw materials, land, and financial **capital** needed to make things. The **proletariat**, or working class, lacked land to grow their own food, tools to make their own products, and capital to build workshops or factories. Unable to make their own living, they sold their work—their labor—to capitalists in return for wages.

Marx identified labor as the key source of value and profit in the marketplace. Owners sought constantly to increase their income by forcing workers to toil faster, longer, and for lower wages, thereby reducing the costs of production and increasing the difference between production costs and sale prices. The surplus value created by the workers could then become profit for the owner. In this relationship, capitalists increased their wealth by extracting the surplus labor value from workers. Recognition of these two fundamentally different positions within the economy—two different classes—was essential to Marx's understanding of power relations in a culture.

Today, anthropologists apply Marx's ideas to analyze class and power in contemporary society while acknowledging that capitalism has grown much

bourgeoisie: Marxian term for the capitalist class that owns the means of production.

means of production: The factories, machines, tools, raw materials, land, and financial capital needed to make things.

capital: Any asset employed or capable of being deployed to produce wealth.

proletariat: Marxian term for the class of laborers who own only their labor.

more complex since Marx's time. Intense competition has grown among capitalists, notably between those in the manufacturing and financial sectors. Small-business owners and farmers now own the means of production, technically making them part of Marx's bourgeoisie, but they do not possess the same access to capital as others in that class. The working class—the proletariat—is divided along lines of race, gender, and ethnicity. Moreover, increasing global circulation of capital is drawing local cultures and communities into class-based relationships that did not exist even a generation ago.

Many contemporary social scientists recognize a middle class of professionals and managers (white-collar workers) that has emerged between capitalists and the working class (blue-collar workers). But others who take a stricter Marxian view of class argue that professionals and managers are still members of the proletariat (Buck 2009; Durrenberger and Erem 2010). They may have more power in the workplace and substantially higher incomes, but they still sell their labor to the bourgeoisie. These managers, government officials, military, police, and even college professors receive special privileges from the bourgeoisie. But for the capitalist class, it is worth the price of extending these privileges to gain the middle class's cooperation in organizing, educating, and controlling the working class, thereby maximizing the capitalists' extraction of profits.

Together with Friedrich Engels, Marx wrote the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), a political pamphlet urging workers to recognize their exploited class position and to unite in opposition to the proletariat–bourgeoisie relationship

Can you apply Marx's understanding of class to a fast-food restaurant? The median full-time salary for a fast-food worker is $23,860 with no benefits. The store manager, who earns a $56,590 median salary annually plus benefits, serves the owner by ensuring that the most surplus labor value possible is extracted from the workers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020).

emerging in the capitalist system. Marx noted, however, that developing a class consciousness among workers—that is, a political awareness of their common position in the economy that would allow them to unite to change the system—would be extremely difficult. Why? The *ideological superstructure* of society—arts, culture, religion, politics, or, contemporarily, Hollywood, social media, virtual reality, and even the notion of the American Dream—distracts people from recognizing the *economic base* that is the true root of their struggles. And the proletariat's continuous struggle simply to make ends meet, as well as the creative means used by the bourgeoisie to keep the proletariat divided, works against a unified challenge to the stratification of society.

Max Weber: Prestige and Life Chances Max Weber (1864–1920), like Marx, wrote against the backdrop of economic and social upheavals in western Europe caused by the expansion of capitalism during the Industrial Revolution. In analyzing the emerging structures of stratification, Weber added consideration of power and prestige to Marx's concern for economic stratification of wealth and income. By **prestige**, Weber referred to the reputation, influence, and deference bestowed on certain people because of their membership in certain groups (Weber [1920] 1946). Thus, certain occupations may hold higher or lower prestige in a culture—for instance, physicians and farmworkers. Prestige, like wealth and income, can affect life chances. Prestige rankings affect how individuals are treated in social situations, their access to influential social networks, and their access to people of wealth and power.

prestige: The reputation, influence, and deference bestowed on certain people because of their membership in certain groups.

Weber saw classes as groups of people whose life chances are determined by similar sets of factors. By **life chances**, Weber meant the opportunities that individuals have to improve their quality of life and realize their life goals. Life chances are determined by access not only to financial resources but also to social resources such as education, health care, food, clothing, and shelter. Class position—relative wealth, power, and prestige—determines access to these resources. According to Weber, members of a class share common life chances, experiences, and access to resources as well as similar exposure and vulnerability to other systems of stratification. For Weber, however, class stratification doesn't just happen. Instead, he suggests that stratification is created and enforced by the state: The state holds the monopoly on the legitimate use of force, and class-based societies and elite control of the means of production would not be possible without the exercise of state power through police, tax collectors, and even the military.

life chances: An individual's opportunities to improve their quality of life and realize life goals.

Pierre Bourdieu: Education and Social Reproduction Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) studied the French educational system to understand relationships among class, culture, and power ([1970] 1990). Throughout much of the world,

education is considered the key to upward social mobility within stratified societies. **Social mobility** refers to one's change of class position—upward or downward—in stratified societies. Theoretically, the *meritocracy* of education—whereby students are deemed successful on the basis of their individual talent and motivation—should provide all students an equal opportunity to advance. Instead, Bourdieu's research uncovered a phenomenon of **social reproduction** in the schools: Rather than providing opportunities for social class mobility, the educational system helped reproduce existing social relations by passing class position from generation to generation in a family.

social mobility: The movement of one's class position upward or downward in stratified societies.

social reproduction: The phenomenon whereby social and class relations of prestige or lack of prestige are passed from one generation to the next.

What factors in schools work against the meritocratic idea and instead serve to limit a person's life chances? First, a family's economic circumstances make a difference. But Bourdieu identified two additional key factors: *habitus* and *cultural capital*.

Bourdieu described **habitus** as the dispositions, self-perceptions, sensibilities, and tastes developed in response to external influences over a lifetime that shape one's conceptions of the world and where one fits into it. Habitus is taught and learned from an early age and is culturally reinforced through family, education, religion, socioeconomic status, and the media. It is not fixed or predetermined, but it is so deeply enculturated and embedded that it becomes an almost instinctive sense of one's potential. Habitus emerges among a class of people as a set of common perceptions that shape expectations and aspirations and guide individuals in assessing their life chances and potential for social mobility. Many major life decisions—for instance, the choice of college education or career—are made on the basis of habitus. To get a sense of the pervasiveness of habitus, think for a moment about your own situation. Why have you chosen to attend college, and this particular college? What major are you pursuing? Might certain concerns of class or money be influencing your educational and career paths? How might this habitus also influence your choice of friends, activities, and, perhaps someday, a marriage partner?

habitus: Bourdieu's term to describe the self-perceptions, sensibilities, and tastes developed in response to external influences over a lifetime that shape one's conceptions of the world and where one fits in it.

Cultural capital is another key to the social reproduction of class. Bourdieu defined **cultural capital** as the knowledge, habits, and tastes learned from parents and family that individuals can use to gain access to scarce and valuable resources of society. For example, family wealth can create cultural capital for children. With enough money, parents can give their children opportunities to travel abroad, learn multiple languages, take music lessons, join sports clubs, go to concerts and museums, have enriching summer experiences, and build social networks with others who have similar opportunities. The less wealthy may pass along existing cultural capital through inexpensive activities like reading, while others may divert additional financial resources toward activities that build cultural capital for their children. These opportunities create the social skills, networks, and senses of power and confidence that are essential for shaping class

cultural capital: The knowledge, habits, and tastes learned from parents and family that individuals can use to gain access to scarce and valuable resources in society.

Children build cultural capital at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

position and identity in stratified societies. Family wealth enables children to perpetuate cultural capital, including by fostering the high motivation and sense of possibility that are crucial for academic success. Schools reward cultural capital. In the process, they reproduce social class advantage.

The U.S. public school system is heavily influenced by cultural capital. From an early age, students are split into separate tracks based on standardized test performance and teacher evaluations. Around sixth grade, for example, students are separated among the remedial math track, the regular math track, and the mathematics track that will lead to Advanced Placement Calculus their senior year in high school. Selective colleges often screen positively for applicants with AP Calculus credits. As a result, decisions made in sixth grade affect students' college possibilities (Mathews 2019). A study of middle-school math groups in Boston public schools revealed how mathematics tracking tends to reproduce class in the classroom. Of the students in the accelerated math track, 56 percent had a parent with a doctorate or other professional degree, and 33 percent had a parent with a master's degree. Just 5.6 percent had parents with only high school degrees. Of the students in remedial math, 48 percent had parents with high school diplomas or less (Useem 1992).

How would you assess your own level of cultural capital? Be aware that cultural capital can also shape how others see you. Do you have the social skills, experiences, and exposure to travel, music, art, and language that will make you seem to be an appropriate fit for a particular workplace? While employers will account for a candidate's skills, they will also, intentionally or not, assess how comfortable they themselves are around the candidate. Can you identify ways

in which your level of cultural capital would provide advantages or disadvantages in scenarios such as succeeding in a job interview, obtaining health care, finding an apartment, or getting a date?

Leith Mullings: Intersectionality among Race, Gender, and Class In recent years, Leith Mullings's (1945–2020) work on intersectionality has led anthropologists to reexamine class by analyzing its deep connections with race and gender. Building on the field's long history of holistic ethnographic studies of local communities, Mullings offers an intersectional approach: She asserts that in the United States and many other areas, class cannot be studied in isolation but must instead be considered together with race and gender as interlocking systems of power. **Intersectionality** provides a framework for analyzing the many factors—especially race and gender—that determine how class is lived and how all three systems of power and stratification build on and shape one another.

intersectionality: An analytic framework for assessing how factors such as race, gender, and class interact to shape individual life chances and societal patterns of stratification.

In the 1990s, Mullings led a study, the Harlem Birth Right Project, that considered the impacts of class, race, and gender on women's health and infant mortality. The study focused on central Harlem, at that time a vibrant, primarily African American community in northern Manhattan, New York City (Mullings 2005b; Mullings and Wali 2001). Of particular concern, infant mortality rates in Harlem were twice the rate of New York City's overall. Previous studies (e.g., Schoendorf, Hogue, and Kleinman 1992) had demonstrated that African American women of all class levels had more problematic birth outcomes than did White women of similar class status. Even college-educated African American women experienced infant mortality at twice the rate of

Mother and child, Harlem, New York. How do class, race, and gender intersect to affect people's life chances?

college-educated White women. This observation suggested that factors other than education and social status were at work.

Mullings's research team gathered data through participant observation in community organizations and other sites in Harlem as well as through surveys, in-depth interviews, and life histories with pregnant women and women with children. On the basis of their data, the team examined how the underlying conditions of housing, employment, child care, and environmental factors, as well as the quality of public spaces, parks, and even grocery and retail stores, might affect the health outcomes being reported in Harlem, where both working-class and middle-class women lived. Since the early 1990s, Harlem has been hard hit by dramatic changes in New York City's economy. Manufacturing jobs with middle-class wages have been lost to flexible accumulation (see Chapters 1 and 11) as New York City–based companies relocate production overseas. Meanwhile, job growth in the metropolitan area has occurred in the high-wage financial sector and in the low-wage service sector. Throughout the 1990s, government social services were cut back while public housing and transportation were allowed to deteriorate.

MAP 10.2
Harlem

The effects on working-class and middle-class women in Mullings's study were notable, with many, especially pregnant women, suffering increased physical and mental stress. Inadequate, overpriced, and poorly maintained private and public housing forced many working-class mothers and their children to be constantly on the move, searching for affordable housing and sharing living spaces with friends and relatives to make ends meet. The need to fight regularly for needed repairs drained time and energy from hardworking women holding multiple low-wage jobs while juggling work and child care. A shortage of steady, well-paying jobs meant that women had very little income security or benefits, so they often pieced together a living from multiple sources. Middle-class women, many of whom were employed in the public sector, were also increasingly subject to layoffs as local governments downsized. The study also found that heavy pollution in the Harlem area, including airborne pollutants from a sewage treatment plant and six bus depots, contributed to elevating the child asthma rate to four times the national average (Mullings 2005b; Mullings and Wali 2001).

The Harlem Birth Right Project illustrates a powerful application of the intersectional approach to understanding class and inequality. It reveals how inequality of resources (class), institutional racism, and gender discrimination combine to affect opportunities for employment, housing, and health care in the Harlem community. It also shows how these factors are linked to elevated health problems and infant mortality.

Mullings points out the many forms of collaboration that women in Harlem use to resist these structures of inequality and survive in their chosen

community. Calling this the *Sojourner syndrome*, she links the agency of contemporary African American women to the life story of Sojourner Truth. Truth was born into slavery in the late 1790s and was emancipated in 1827 after experiencing physical abuse and rape and watching many of her children be sold away from her. Subsequently, she became an itinerant preacher for the abolition of slavery, building coalitions with White abolitionists and later participating in the early women's rights movement. The stories of the women in Harlem today, like Sojourner Truth's, reflect the determination and creativity required to overcome interlocking constraints of racism, sexism, and class inequality.

Applying Theory to Practice: Analyzing Class in the Flint, Michigan, Water Crisis

Let's return to the story at the beginning of the chapter. Can you apply the theoretical concepts introduced by Marx, Weber, Bourdieu, and Mullings to analyze the water crisis in Flint and the economic and social dynamics at work in that community? Can you recognize a stratification of classes based on control over the means of production as Marx suggested? Where do children with lead poisoning, the pediatrician, the university researchers, the emergency manager, the National Guard, the governor of Michigan, and the CEO of General Motors fit? How do you assess the differential life chances of those connected by the water crisis? How does class affect their life chances for education, health, and financial security? Does prestige play a role in differentially shaping their life chances? How do habitus and cultural capital affect the social mobility of each person? And how do systems of stratification such as race, gender, and class intersect in this context? Because class is so rarely discussed in U.S. culture, these questions may seem difficult to pursue. But by asking these questions about the circulation of water—or any cultural activity, group, or institution—you begin to develop the tools necessary to think like an anthropologist.

How Are Class and Inequality Constructed in the United States?

» Explain systems of class and inequality in the United States.

The United States' national myth tells of a "classless" society with open access to upward social mobility for those who are hardworking and talented, including the potential to rise from rags to riches in a single generation. Is this cultural story a reality? In fact, in the United States, one's life chances are heavily influenced by the class position of one's family—the financial and cultural resources passed from generation to generation. Both quantitative and qualitative research

Leith Mullings

Analyzing Intersecting Systems of Power

Leith Mullings (1945–2020) first encountered anthropology as an undergraduate at Queens College, City University of New York, during the civil rights movement. As a distinguished professor at the City University of New York Graduate Center and president of the American Anthropological Association, Mullings became well known over the course of her career for her work on intersectionality—analyzing the intersection of race, class, and gender—which she put to work in her ethnographic fieldwork, including a groundbreaking project on health disparities in Harlem, New York.

"One reason I became interested in the Harlem project was the opportunity to undertake a study that embraced community collaboration in research. Community collaboration refers to involving the community in guiding research in a wide variety of ways.

"For example, the researchers formed a Community Advisory Board (CAB) composed of people who lived or worked in Harlem. The CAB suggested that instead of recounting the data in the traditional format—unemployment, female-headed households, numbers of people on welfare—that we report the same data in a more positive way—for example, how many people are employed, how many are not on welfare? In other words, to emphasize the strengths of the community.

"The CAB also advised us to consider the ways people resisted and the ways people attempted to overcome the circumstances they found themselves in. For instance, they suggested that we do ethnography in Housing Court. There I encountered Harlem women on their own, bravely confronting the lawyers of their landlords in order to hold on to shelter for themselves and their children. That was one of the ways in which we discovered how much insecure housing negatively affects health and well-being.

"The CAB also pointed us to the lines at Legal Aid as people tried to prevent their children from being placed in the problematic special education track. Filing complaints of police brutality and job discrimination, or informing the City about landlords who did not provide heat or hot water, are all ways people tried to better their lives that are not obvious to the casual observer. They don't show up in the news. They don't show up in the statistics. Major social movements such as the civil rights movement or people marching against police brutality may make the news. The day-to-day struggles people wage are often not apparent. We may not have directly encountered this without community collaboration."

Since its popularization in the early 1980s, intersectionality has become a key theoretical approach within anthropology and other social sciences—but one that requires careful analysis of local realities. "What is not addressed in many statements of intersectionality is how to analyze the intersection of race, class, and gender.

Anthropologist Leith Mullings

What is their relationship? In some circles it has become a mantra. Many scholars reiterate 'Race, Class, Gender: Intersectionality.' But the real work lies in understanding how, at a particular moment, these three indices of inequality articulate.

"I believe that class is prefigurative. Race and gender have various degrees of salience in different historical conditions, societies, or locations.

"Sometimes one trumps the other. For example, in the contemporary United States, gender subordination results in some limitations for elite women. But in most instances, class trumps: Access to huge resources allows them all kinds of privileges and freedom unimagined by most men or women.

"To put intersectionality to work, when you read a newspaper, encounter situations, or interact with people, think—and this is a hard concept—what are the axes of stratification that affect the opportunities of the people involved? Start by thinking about Whiteness, for instance: What are the privileges that Whiteness brings, whatever the class? What obstacles do people of different classes, races, and/or genders confront? What does it mean in their lives? What does that mean for their opportunities?

"Take something so minor as trying to get a taxi. It is often difficult for Black people of any class to catch a cab in New York City. A cab driver will frequently pass a Black person by to pick up a White person. Race is the first thing the drivers see. Taxi drivers cannot always read class. People do not always "wear" their class. A number of elite Black people have had trouble getting cabs, famously the actor Danny Glover or former New York City mayor David Dinkins. But as an older Black woman, I can get a taxi to stop more often than my son Michael, a tall, good-looking, dark-skinned Black man, who can rarely get a cab to stop. The intersection of gender and race make it more difficult for him to get a taxi.

"These are daily inconveniences. But think about how it works on a broader level: trying to find a job or housing, or even to purchase a car. White and Black 'testers' with virtually identical resumés and qualifications have been sent to job interviews; 20 to 25 percent of the time, Blacks and Latinos were 'treated less well' and often not called back for interviews or offered lesser jobs and lower pay than their counterparts with the same qualifications. Studies (see Marable 2000) have demonstrated that African Americans with financial circumstances identical or superior to Whites have been denied loans or are offered mortgages with less favorable terms."

> *"To put intersectionality to work, when you read a newspaper, encounter situations, or interact with people, think, 'What are the axes of stratification that affect the opportunities of the people involved?'"*

In thinking about anthropology as a toolkit for life, Mullings offers the following observation: "Anthropology is important because anyone living in today's world will have to learn to live with many different kinds of people. We live in a global, transnational world in which few places are isolated. Anthropology also encourages looking beneath the appearance to the underlying structure. You don't have to become a professional anthropologist. But it is a way of being in the world. It is an important lens through which to understand today's world. In the end, this is what makes us anthropologists, eyes wide open."

reveal that stratification by class is very real and significantly affects people's life chances. What are the odds that a child affected by lead poisoning in Flint will someday grow up to be the CEO of General Motors or the governor of the state of Michigan?

Class stratification in the United States is not new. The signers of the Declaration of Independence and drafters of the U.S. Constitution were among the richest people in the thirteen colonies at that time, having built their wealth largely on the stolen labor of enslaved Africans on land taken from Native Americans. George Washington was one of the largest landholders and slave owners. In the southwest, labor was extracted from conquered people in a system established under Spanish colonialism that continued after the territory's annexation by the United States—a system that rivaled the oppression of Black people in the American South and East. As the young nation's territories spread westward, opportunities for upward social mobility were plentiful for certain immigrant portions of the population but not for Native Americans, Black Americans, and most women. Access to wealth, power, prestige, and the resources of U.S. society were stratified not only by race and gender but also by class. Income and wealth inequality narrowed after World War II as an economic boom spurred a growing middle class, particularly among European Americans. Government benefits such as the GI Bill for returning soldiers created opportunities for a new segment of the population to attend college and own homes, and labor unions forced employers to improve pay and working conditions. But since the mid-1970s, inequality has been increasing as income and wealth have become concentrated at the upper end of the economic spectrum.

Ethnographic Studies of Class in the United States

Anthropologists have studied the construction of class and its effects across the spectrum of U.S. culture—in rural, urban, and suburban settings and in relationship to race and gender. Ethnographic studies like those presented here explore class and income inequality in local contexts and their impact on the life chances of real people in local communities.

MAP 10.3
Kentucky

Poor Whites in Rural Kentucky In *Worked to the Bone: Race, Class, Power, and Privilege in Kentucky* (2001), anthropologist Pem Davidson Buck provides a dynamic introduction to intersectionality. She analyzes the intersections of class, race, and gender through the history of the poor White population in two rural Kentucky counties. Here, the privileges often associated with Whiteness in the United States have been severely limited by class. Buck traces the development of an economic system built on tobacco cultivation, coal mining, and manufacturing that has created a class hierarchy in which "sweat is made

Miners in Hazard, Kentucky, sit in a "break car" that will carry them down a coal mine shaft for their daily work shift. How does their sweat "trickle up"?

to trickle up" (13). In other words (reflecting Marx's theory), the surplus value of workers' labor drains upward into the hands of successive layers of elites.

According to Buck, numerous historical events and processes contributed to this development. The construction of race in Kentucky through slavery, sharecropping, and Jim Crow legislation served to persuade European laborers that they should value their Whiteness and align their primary identities with the White elite rather than build solidarity with laborers of other races. The dispossession of Native Americans from their land consolidated elite control over the territory's natural resources. Later, poor and working-class Whites were enticed by the elites with promises of White privilege to view all newcomer groups (such as Jews, Catholics, Irish, and later immigrants) with suspicion as outsiders, ethnic "others," and "White trash" rather than as potential allies in the struggle for fair value, wages, and compensation for their work.

Buck writes about life in central Kentucky from a personal perspective. She and her husband bought land in the rolling farm country, choosing to not pursue careers and instead to try to live off the land. They grew food in their garden, raised goats and dairy calves, and took various jobs shoveling corn or stripping tobacco on a large farm to make ends meet. Buck's husband eventually took a job with a plumbing and heating supply company, and later they started a small plumbing and heating business of their own. All told, they spent twelve years living under the poverty line and producing most of their own food. Reflecting on her time in central Kentucky, Buck writes:

> It was while fixing plumbing leaks, lying on my back under kitchen counters, soldering pipes while wedged between bottles of cleaning fluids, that I learned about the view from under the sink.

> I often found myself in fairly wealthy homes, looking up from under the sink at the lady of the house and thinking about her life. She had furniture I could not afford, dressed her children from stores I never entered, and complained about leaking plumbing at a time when what few pipes we had in our own house froze and burst with remarkable regularity. (Buck 2001, 2)

It is this "view from under the sink" that Buck brings to her analysis—the view of the farmhands, handyworkers, factory workers, and students struggling to make ends meet despite endless hours of backbreaking work. It is the view of people who see clearly how their sweat trickles up to enhance the lives and economic success of others who are already better off.

Buck places Kentucky's economic development within the context of national economic trends and the global economy. Whiteness has been a continuously evolving smokescreen, she claims, adjusted and readjusted to the changing needs of the elites as the drainage system has been reorganized:

> We are presently in . . . a period of intense competition, this time between elites around the world struggling to control the global economy. The consequences of that struggle are now filtering into the middle class, although they have been affecting people lower in the drainage system since the late 1970s. Whiteness no longer provides protection from the consequences of policies that make larger and larger portions of the United States into a Third World labor force. Nor does middle-class status provide complete protection. (221–22)

Through her analysis, Buck—who drew on her own middle-class cultural capital to escape poverty—draws connections between class and race in U.S. culture. The construction of class, as she chronicles in her reflections on her community in central Kentucky, has relied on a complex manufacturing of what it means to be White. But as the local economy of the rural United States becomes further integrated into the global economy, and as the sweat of local workers trickles further and further up, even the privileges of Whiteness are not enough to protect those who live at or below the poverty line and whose fingers are already "worked to the bone."

Downward Mobility: The Middle Class and the Working Poor Wealth and poverty mark the extremes of a fluid class continuum, but the expected trajectory up the ladder—the core of the so-called American dream—often eludes U.S. families. Social mobility does not always involve movement up the class

ladder. News stories, television shows, movies, newspapers, and magazines rarely publish articles about the downwardly mobile. This is a "hidden dimension of our society's experience because it simply does not fit into our cultural universe" (Newman 1999, 9). Instead, our cultural narrative is a story of a meritocracy where "worthy individuals rise to the top and the undeserving fall by the way side" (243).

In *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City* (1999), Katherine Newman asks why, in a nation of great prosperity and wealth, people who work full time are still poor. She examines obstacles facing the working poor—those who often work more than full time to make ends meet and for whom minimum-wage jobs are not enough to pull themselves or their families out of poverty. Many people in the United States believe that urban poverty is a result of lack of motivation, welfare dependency, and a poor work ethic (see "The 'Culture of Poverty': Poverty as Pathology" on p. 382), but Newman challenges this vision as a gap in our understanding of urban environments and inner-city economies. In these milieus, she has found a broad array of hard-working citizens for whom hard work does not pay off, who struggle to provide for their families, who are one paycheck away from financial disaster. According to Newman, the main determinant of class position and social mobility is not one's work ethic but the structural barriers that have created an increasing gap between the life chances of the well-educated and highly skilled and those of high school dropouts (see "Poverty as a Structural Economic Problem" on p. 382; Durrenberger 2001; Wacquant 2002).

Wealth, Inequality, and Wall Street Although many anthropologists study the most marginalized members of a culture, a number of research projects have "studied up" (Nader 1972; Savage and Williams 2008): They have investigated power elites and cultural decision makers ranging from elite scientists (Gusterson 1996) and Wall Street executives (Tett 2009) to government officials (Brash 2011). In *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street* (2008), anthropologist Karen Ho relates how she went to work in a Wall Street investment bank to understand the inner workings of Wall Street in the 1990s during one of its biggest boom periods. Why, she asks, in times of record corporate profits and soaring stock prices, do we see rapid downsizing, layoffs, and dismantling of the social safety net? She focuses on the surprising fact that when corporations lay off workers and downsize, not only do the companies' stock prices go up but the stock values of the investment banks go up as well.

Ho points to a transformation of the corporate culture of Wall Street. The desire for profits is not new; what is new, she finds, is a disconnect between what is considered best for the corporation and what is best for most of its employees. Today, employees seldom benefit from corporate success. Instead,

YOUR TURN: FIELDWORK

Ten Chairs of Inequality

To dramatize the distribution of wealth in the United States, find ten friends and ten chairs. Each chair will represent 10 percent of the nation's wealth, and each person will represent 10 percent of the population. Place one friend in each chair to visualize what an even distribution of wealth would look like. Ask yourselves what the ideal distribution of wealth should be and arrange yourselves in the chairs accordingly. Now ask what you think the actual distribution is and rearrange yourselves again. To visualize the actual distribution of wealth, pick one of your friends and give her seven chairs. This shows the proportion of wealth held by the top 10 percent of the population. In fact, if your friend's arm represented the top 1 percent of the population, her arm alone would have more than three chairs (about 33 percent). Your other nine friends get to share the remaining three chairs. But to make the exercise even more accurate, place one of your friends on the floor with no chair to represent the 10 percent of the population with negative wealth—more debt than assets.

Ten Chairs of Inequality

Source: Adapted from Giecek, Tamara Sober. 2013. "The Ten Chairs." Teaching Economics as if People Mattered. *www.teachingeconomics.org*

How does it feel to be in the group of nine or to be the one person in the top 10 percent? What is it like to be the one person sitting on the floor? This exercise reveals the dynamics of the stratification of power through wealth in U.S. society. How would Marx, Weber, Bourdieu, and Mullings explain how the current arrangement came to be? The exercise also offers potential insights into social mobility. What are the chances that any of the nine people sharing three chairs will be able to move into a situation in which they have seven chairs? What conditions would need to exist for that social mobility to happen? There clearly could be more equality. Can you imagine being frustrated enough to revolt and take a few chairs by force? What keeps you from doing it?

For further consideration of class and inequality, consider viewing the YouTube videos "Wealth Inequality in America" and "Global Wealth Inequality" cited in the For Further Exploration section at the end of the chapter.

What is the corporate culture of Wall Street investment banks? Did it contribute to the 2008 financial crash?

the benefits go to stockholders. Ho suggests that a "new cultural code for doing business" on Wall Street—characterized by a relentless search for unending profits and combined with government deregulation of the financial services industry—rewards efforts to make money, not efforts to make goods and services. Witness in recent years the willingness of commercial banks and investment houses to bundle and resell high-risk mortgages, exposed in the book and feature film *The Big Short* and the documentary *The Inside Job*, which played a key role in the 2008 market meltdown and Wall Street collapse. Ho regards the collapse of Wall Street banks and investment houses in 2008 not so much as a surprise or anomaly but as a predictable result of Wall Street culture, values, and workplace models.

Despite the U.S. national myth of a classless society, quantitative and qualitative studies have exposed the depths of inequality and stratification as well as the obstacles to social mobility. Although class stratification is not new, historical research suggests it is also not inevitable. By examining both statistical and ethnographic material, anthropologists seek to reopen a conversation about the roots of inequality—the obstacles to greater opportunity, social mobility, and improved life chances in a culture that is reluctant to discuss class.

A Look at the Numbers

Economic statistics provide a sobering picture of inequality in the United States today. They also reveal the increasing concentration of income and wealth at the top rungs of the class ladder. In reviewing statistics related to class, we examine both income and wealth.

income: What people earn from work plus dividends and interest on investments along with earnings from rents and royalties.

Income In society, **income** is what people earn from work plus dividends and interest on investments along with earnings from rents and royalties. (A *dividend* is a payment by a corporation to its shareholders of a portion of corporate profits. *Interest* is a fee paid for the use of borrowed money—for example, interest that a bank pays to the holder of a bank savings account. *Rent* refers to payment to an owner as compensation for the use of land, a building, an apartment, property, or equipment. *Royalties* are income based on a percentage of the revenue from the sale of a patent, book, or theatrical work paid to the inventor or author.) Table 10.1a shows a breakdown of household income in the United States for 2020. Do you know where your family fits in the national income range? Review the accompanying charts to get an idea of your family's position and how it may have changed over the years.

Income patterns reveal how power is distributed in a society. As Table 10.1b illustrates, income distribution among the U.S. households shows a heavy concentration at the top. Although the median household income in the United States in 2020 was $67,521 (meaning that half of the nation's households earned more than that and half earned less), the top 5 percent of households received 23 percent of all income. The top 20 percent received 52.2 percent of all income, while the bottom 20 percent received only 3 percent. The bottom 40 percent totaled only 8.1 percent of all income. These gaps have widened substantially over the past four decades.

TABLE 10.1 Household Income Disparities in the United States

a) U.S. HOUSEHOLD INCOME BY PERCENTAGE, 2020

Percentage of U.S. Households	Household Income Range
Top 5%	Above $273,739
Top 20%	Above $141,110
Second 20%	$85,077–$141,110
Middle 20%	$52,180–$85,076
Fourth 20%	$27,027–$52,179
Bottom 20%	Less than $27,026

b) DISTRIBUTION OF U.S. HOUSEHOLD INCOME, 1967 VERSUS 2020

	Top 5% of Population	Top 20% of Population	Bottom 40% of Population	Bottom 20% of Population
1967	17.2%	43.6%	10.8%	4%
2020	23%	52.2%	8.1%	3%

SOURCE: *U.S. Census Bureau. 2020. "Historical Income Tables: Income Inequality, Tables H-1 and H-2 All Races." https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-income-inequality.html*

Furthermore, the gap between people at the top end of the income scale and average workers has dramatically increased over the past five decades (Figure 10.1). Between 1978 and 2020, the average pay for corporate CEOs increased by 1,322 percent. The typical worker's pay increased only 18 percent. In 1965, the salaries of corporate CEOs averaged eighteen times the pay of an average worker. By 2020, that number had skyrocketed to an astonishing 351 times the average worker's pay. The average pay of CEOs at the top 350 U.S. corporations was $24.2 million. The typical worker at McDonald's or Starbucks needed to work for six months to earn what a CEO at a top American corporation earned in one hour. In 2019, in the United States, as many as 290,876 people earned $10 million or more.

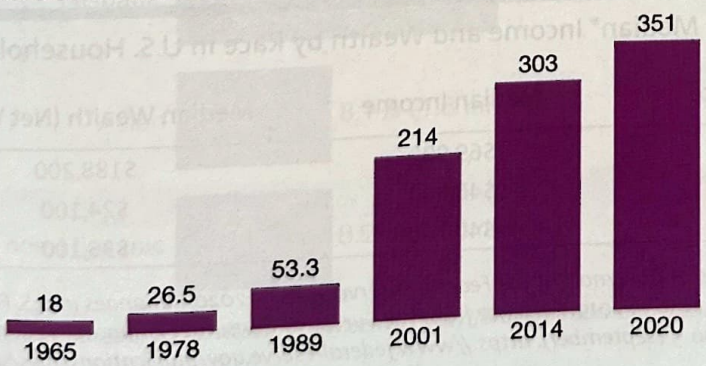
Wealth Another key indicator of the distribution of power in a society is wealth. By **wealth** we mean the total value of what someone owns—including stocks, bonds, and real estate—minus any debt, such as mortgage or credit card debt. Wealth may be accumulated, or it may be inherited, growing over generations. If wealth were evenly distributed, every U.S. household would have had $692,100 in 2016 (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System 2016).

wealth: The total value of what someone owns, minus any debt.

But, as Table 10.2 shows, wealth is even more unevenly distributed than income. The widening gap in wealth has multiple causes. First, shifts in the U.S. tax code have lowered the top tax rate from 91 percent in the years from 1950 to 1963 to 37 percent beginning in 2018, allowing the wealthy to retain far more of their income (Tax Policy Center 2019). Second, wages for most U.S. families have stagnated since the early 1970s. Meanwhile credit card, education, and mortgage debt have skyrocketed.

In the stock market, the top 1 percent of all U.S. households own 49.8 percent of all stocks. The top 10 percent own 91 percent. Fully 50 percent of U.S. households own no stocks. Even among those who do hold stocks, most own them through pension and retirement funds, where they are not accessible for general

FIGURE 10.1 Ratio of Average U.S. CEO Pay to Average Worker Pay, 1965–2020



SOURCE: *www.epi.org.*

TABLE 10.2 Distribution of Household Wealth in the United States, 2021

Percentage of Households	Percentage of Total Household Wealth
Top 1%	32.1%
Next 9%	37.5%
Bottom 90%	30.4%

SOURCE: *Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. 2021. "Distribution of Household Wealth in the U.S. since 1989." https://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/z1/dataviz/dfa/distribute/table/#quarter:128;series:Net%20worth;demographic:networth;population:all;units.*

use. Only 1.6 percent of Americans receive $100,000 or more in inheritance. Another 1.1 percent receive $50,000 to $100,000. Ninety-two percent receive no inheritance whatsoever (Domhoff 2022).

Wealth is also stratified by race, as Table 10.3 shows. Reflecting the devastating long-term effects of slavery and Jim Crow segregation on the African American community, as well as the difficult immigration experiences of most of the U.S. Hispanic population, White households have accumulated fifteen times the net worth of Black and Hispanic households.

Most Americans struggle to identify the distribution of income and wealth in the United States and to locate their position within it (Norton and Ariely 2011). After reviewing the quantitative data on income and wealth stratification in the United States, which pieces of information were particularly surprising to you? Does the statistical picture correspond with the picture of U.S. society that you imagined? Do you have a clearer sense of where you and your family currently stand?

The Roots of Poverty

Why do people live in poverty in the United States—one of the wealthiest countries in the world? The actual roots of poverty, part of the same system that

TABLE 10.3 Median* Income and Wealth by Race in U.S. Households, 2019

Race	Median Income	Median Wealth (Net Worth)
White	$69,000	$188,200
Black	$40,300	$24,100
Hispanic	$40,700	$36,100

SOURCE: *Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. 2020. "Changes in U.S. Family Finances from 2016 to 2019: Evidence from the Survey of Consumer Finances."* Federal Reserve Bulletin *106, no. 5 (September). https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/files/scf20.pdf*

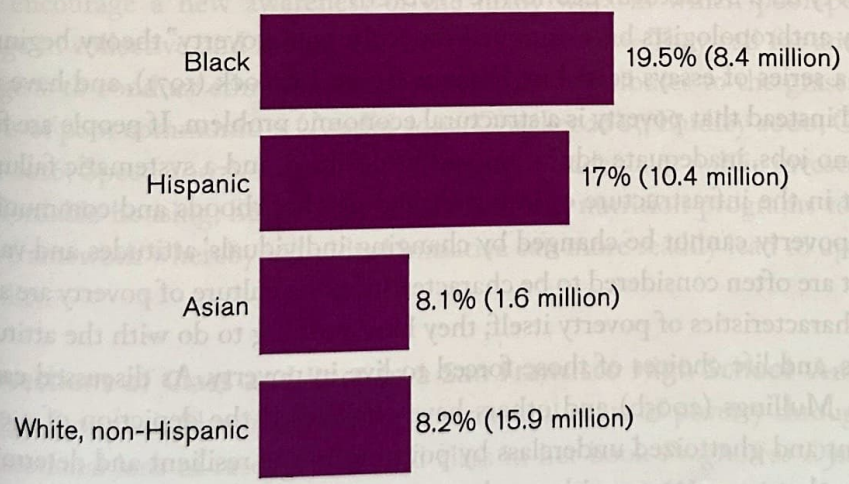
creates wealth, must be clearly understood if the experience of poverty is to be eliminated or ameliorated.

The U.S. Census Bureau reported that 37.2 million people—11.4 percent of the U.S. population—were living in poverty in 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau 2021), including 16.1 percent of U.S. children under the age of 18. The U.S. government's 2020 poverty line for single adults stood at $13,171 in pretax income and $26,496 for a family of four. How could a family of four (or two or three, for that matter) eat, pay rent, have clean clothes, care for even the most rudimentary dental or health needs, and keep heat, water, and electricity turned on with $552 per family member per month? The U.S. poverty line calculations, developed in 1964, are widely considered to be unrealistic in today's economy; instead, most scholars suggest that a poverty line that is 50 percent higher is a more useful representation of people's standard of living.

Poverty rates vary by race (Figure 10.2). In 2020, Hispanics had a 17 percent poverty rate, representing 10,409,000 people. Non-Hispanic Whites were at 8.2 percent, with 15,942,000 people below the poverty line. The Black poverty rate was 19.5 percent, or 8,472,000 people. The Asian poverty rate was 8.1 percent, or 1,629,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau 2021). Chapter 5's discussion of the history and contemporary expressions of race and racism in the United States helped shed light on these disparities. Despite prevalent media representations of inner-city poverty among communities of color, it is important to note that the largest group of poor Americans are White and live in rural and suburban areas, as represented in Pem Buck's work.

Anthropologists and other social scientists have articulated numerous theories to explain poverty's origins and persistence. In the United States, two key

FIGURE 10.2 PERCENTAGE (AND TOTAL) OF PEOPLE IN POVERTY WITHIN RACIAL GROUPS, 2020



SOURCE: *U.S. Census Bureau, 2021. https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2021/demo/p60-273.html.*

theories have emerged: One focuses on poverty as pathology, and the other focuses on poverty as a structural economic problem.

The "Culture of Poverty": Poverty as Pathology

Theories of poverty as pathology trace ongoing poverty to the personal failings of the individual, family, or community. Such theories—which most anthropologists reject—see these failings as stemming from a combination of dysfunctional behaviors, attitudes, and values that make and keep poor people poor. Anthropologist Oscar Lewis called this a "culture of poverty." His research in Mexico (1959), Puerto Rico, and the United States (1966) suggested that certain ways of thinking and feeling perpetuate poverty among poor communities. Lewis argued that children growing up poor in a highly class-stratified economic system were particularly vulnerable to developing feelings of marginality, helplessness, and dependency that would shape their value systems, worldviews, aspirations, and character, making it difficult for them to escape poverty.

Lewis's work focused primarily on the impact of poverty in the developing world, but his research and theory of a culture of poverty became attractive to policy makers in the United States. Key among them was Daniel Patrick Moynihan, whose 1965 report "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" attempted to trace poverty in African American communities to cultural patterns, despite the evident structural causes of inequality and discrimination built into Jim Crow laws codifying segregation. Although many scholars, including anthropologists, discredited the culture of poverty theory on the grounds that it blamed the victims of poverty for structural problems beyond their control, the theory formed the basis of key social policies during the latter part of the twentieth century (Wilson 1987).

Poverty as a Structural Economic Problem

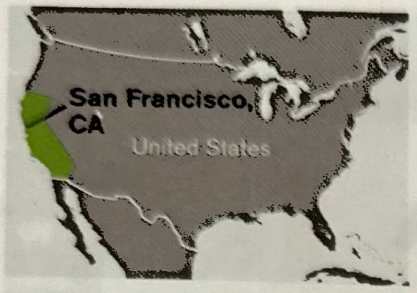
Many anthropologists have critiqued the "culture of poverty" theory, beginning with a series of essays edited by Eleanor Burke Leacock (1971), and have proposed instead that poverty is a structural economic problem. If people are faced with no jobs, inadequate education and health care, and a systematic failure to invest in the infrastructure of impoverished neighborhoods and communities, then poverty cannot be changed by changing individuals' attitudes and values. What are often considered to be characteristics of a culture of poverty are actually characteristics of poverty itself; they have nothing to do with the attitudes, values, and life choices of those forced to live in poverty. As discussed earlier, Leith Mullings (2005b) and others have challenged the depiction of a complacent and ghettoized underclass by pointing to the resilient and determined efforts that poor communities make to overcome their dire economic, social, and political conditions.

Anthropologists Judith Goode and Jeff Maskovsky (2001) challenge the culture of poverty argument by questioning its focus on poor communities as isolated spheres. Instead, they trace the roots of contemporary poverty in the United States to the impact of global economic processes on the nation's economy, particularly the effects of flexible accumulation and uneven development. The growth of globalization and the expansion of global capitalism, they argue, have launched an economic restructuring in which corporations ship high-paying, blue-collar manufacturing jobs overseas in search of cheaper labor, lower taxes, and fewer environmental restrictions. The U.S. workforce has become more polarized between highly educated, well-paid professionals and managers, on the one hand, and undereducated workers, who struggle with low pay, no benefits, and little job security, on the other. U.S. government policies and programs designed to regulate the economy, protect the most vulnerable, and provide opportunities for social mobility have been reduced, including public education, housing, and investment in infrastructure such as roads, bridges, water systems, and power grids.

How is flexible accumulation shaping U.S. inequality? Laid-off factory workers of the closed Doosan Bobcat plant in Bismarck, North Dakota, symbolically leave behind steel-toed work boots in the parking lot as they exit the plant for the final time.

Goode and Maskovsky warn that as poverty and inequality grow, those most deeply affected remain largely hidden and disappear from national awareness. This includes nearly one in five U.S. children who now live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau 2021). In response, they encourage a new awareness of the many ways in which poor people engage in collective and individual strategies to survive. They call for anthropologists to conduct ethnographic research that contributes to the grassroots efforts of poor communities (Anglin 2002; Checker 2005; Dudley 2000; Goldstein 2016; Speed 2007). In addition, they call for adequate public investment in affordable housing, health care, education, and nutrition programs to create a framework whereby individual initiative can more readily lead to upward mobility.

Intersections of Class and Race in a San Francisco High School Anthropologist Savannah Shange explores the structural roots of poverty through an intersectional lens of race, gender, and class in her book *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiblackness, + Schooling in San Francisco* (2019). What, she asks, is to be done when the world simply doesn't work, when one lives in a dystopia of



MAP 10.4
San Francisco

lessened life chances, limited health care, poor education, mass incarceration, widespread poverty, and diminished life spans?

Shange conducted fieldwork at Robeson Justice Academy, a community-initiated high school serving one of the last working-class neighborhoods in San Francisco. The school's progressive curriculum is designed to offer low-income young people of color a liberating education designed around social justice themes and initiatives. San Francisco, imagined by many to be a leading liberal, progressive city, has suffered an exodus of Black residents in recent decades in the face of gentrification, redlining, urban renewal projects that have destroyed primarily Black neighborhoods, pollution, and other forms of racialized displacement. Shange reminds us that San Francisco, like other U.S. cities, is built upon a past that includes the genocide of the local Indigenous population and the long afterlife of slavery. By 2020, San Francisco's Black population had plunged to just 5.2 percent, compared to 12.4 percent in the United States nationally. Robeson's student body, now majority Latinx, reflects this shift.

Despite Robeson's lofty goals and sincere pursuit of multiracial uplift, Shange documents the school's struggle to serve its Black students. Black staff, students, and family are marginalized, those seen as disruptive are counseled to transfer out, and the border between the school and neighborhood is criminalized. Robeson's Black students face the highest suspension rates in the district and disproportionately high rates of disciplinary procedures and expulsions. Shange views these patterns within the national context of a school-to-prison pipeline in which zero-tolerance disciplinary policies disproportionately affect students of color, particularly Black students, leading to a cycle of arrests, detentions, and incarceration within the prison system.

In 2016, when a grand jury in Ferguson, Missouri, failed to bring charges against the officer who killed unarmed Black teenager Michael Brown, students at Robeson organized a protest. With the support of school administrators and teachers, students gathered on the basketball court with hands in the air, some holding signs that said "Hands up, Don't Shoot" and "Murder is Illegal—Arrest the Officer." The school website posted a photo of the action emblazoned with the title "#OurLivesMatter." Shange critiques this slogan's shift away from the original #BlackLivesMatter hashtag's focus on Black lives and Black bodies. But she also suggests that the demonstration reveals Robeson's fundamental failure in addressing racism and poverty. The demonstration, she argues, channeled student concerns into what can be done: basic demands like don't shoot unarmed civilians, protect Black and Brown youth from police violence, arrest those who kill other people. Shange identifies these as typical progressive strategies for addressing inequality: reform the system, win control over the mechanisms of the state, redistribute its resources in incremental progressive programs. But what if what *can* be done is not what *needs* to be done?

Educators and staff at Robeson are winning within the system. They provide a culturally competent, engaged, democratically oriented education designed to enact the best-case scenario for surviving and living in the world as it exists. Shange warns, however, that winning within the system is inadequate when the system itself, built over many generations, creates the dystopia—deep structural patterns of inequality, a world that doesn't work—in the first place. In such a dystopian scenario, she asks, is there any choice but to willfully defy systemic racism, disrupt patterns of exploitation and anti-Blackness, abolish state-sponsored practices of dispossession, and create something new?

Building on anthropologist Leith Mullings's work on intersectionality, Shange's study confirms that class in the United States and elsewhere cannot be studied in isolation but, instead, must be considered together with other interlocking systems of power such as race. Only by analyzing the intersection of multiple systems of power can we see more clearly how class is lived and life chances are defined.

Discussions about the root causes of poverty continue today in both popular conversations and policy circles. Intense debate continues, for instance, over the appropriate role of government in addressing problems of persistent poverty. Arguments often draw on the distinction between seeing the roots of these problems in a culture of poverty or in a long-term structural system of exclusion built into government policies and economic practices. Can poverty be addressed through improved housing, provision of health care, education, and the creation of living-wage jobs (the structural causes)? Or must perceived patterns of dependency on government programs and services be addressed to confront an underlying culture that holds people back? You will encounter these questions in conversations with classmates and coworkers, and you will influence these debates at different points in your life—perhaps as you undertake community service as a college student or later as you participate in the U.S. political process.

How Are Class and Inequality Constructed Globally?

» Analyze how systems of class and inequality operate globally.

Uneven development is a central characteristic of globalization, particularly of the global capitalist system. The global economy has not brought equal benefits to the world's people; it has produced unprecedented wealth and widespread poverty. It appears that the rapid growth of globalization actually depends on uneven development—extracting the resources of some to fuel the success of others. Systems of class and caste are central to creating and maintaining these patterns of extraction, stratification, and uneven effects on individuals'

life chances and possibilities for upward social mobility. Because class-based inequality affects people in every corner of the world, it will be increasingly important for globally engaged citizens to understand its impact.

Street Vendors in the Global Economy

In his study of street vendors in the enormous Cancha outdoor market in Cochabamba, Bolivia, anthropologist Daniel Goldstein (2016) explores the contours of class and inequality for the poorest and most vulnerable people in today's globalized economy. Today's global economic transformations have led to historic levels of poverty in the world's poorest cities as rural dwellers with limited job opportunities and no state safety net move to urban areas in search of survival and security for themselves and their families. Goldstein's ethnographic research focuses specifically on vulnerable street vendors and their small-scale commercial activities, or what scholars call the informal economy: the underground, and sometimes illegal, system of buying and selling that parallels the official economy. In many poor countries like Bolivia—the poorest in Latin America—and particularly in urban centers like Cochabamba, the informal economy has come to constitute the majority of economic activity.

The informal economy—small-scale, underground, and sometimes illegal—has become the primary economic activity in many poor countries. Here, street vendors and stall vendors compete for customers at the sprawling Cancha outdoor market in downtown Cochabamba, Bolivia.

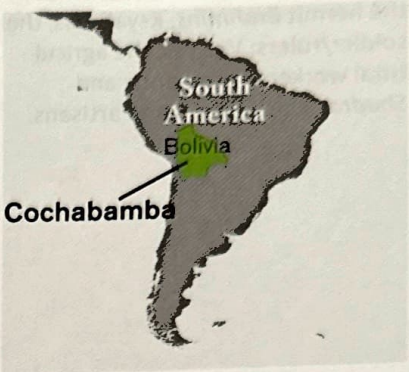
The bright, colorful, and dynamic Cancha marketplace is the largest of its kind in Bolivia. Thousands of long-term merchants, known as *fijos*, sell their wares from narrow stalls in the market's central pavilion. At the same time, thousands of street vendors, locally known as *ambulantes*, rove the surrounding traffic-clogged streets and packed sidewalks, alleyways, and passageways, hawking food, drink, watches, radios, DVDs, men's briefs, hardware, soap, cosmetics, bananas, rice—any small, portable item that might attract the attention of a local shopper or visiting tourist. While stall vendors and street vendors alike contribute to the dynamism and success of the market, their experiences stand in stark contrast. Tensions between the groups run high. Their furious competition for sales ensures that. But the *fijos* and *ambulantes* operate on unequal playing fields. For stall vendors, their fixed, permanent, and legal locations at the center of the market provide a more secure position in the local economy. Their stability and legal status create conditions for economic success and the potential, if all goes well, for upward economic mobility.

The street vendors of the Cancha, in contrast, work under much more tenuous and vulnerable conditions. They are harassed by police, insulted by motorists and

pedestrians, preyed upon by shoplifters and muggers. State laws explicitly prohibit them from selling on the street. And yet thousands do. Though enforcement of these laws is inconsistent, street vendors daily risk fines and arrests as they struggle against the poverty facing their families. Their "in between place" of informality and illegality makes them particularly vulnerable, exploitable, and insecure. And when corrupt government officials simultaneously sell space to vendors on the street and sidewalks while authorizing police crackdowns and fines, they turn street vendors' vulnerability into a source of profit.

Goldstein argues that the marked growth of informal urban economic activity worldwide is produced not by the informal workers themselves but by the state's creation and regulation of economic and political conditions. What may appear to the outsider as chaotic, disorderly, or even criminal and dangerous is not random at all. Rather, the state and its representatives create and benefit directly from the conditions of informality and illegality that turn urban small-scale entrepreneurs into criminals. Inconsistently enforced laws and regulations applied to poor city dwellers—an increasingly common pattern in the contemporary global economy—only increase workers' experience of uncertainty, insecurity, and vulnerability.

Despite the chaos and disorder built into the informal activity in the Cancha, Goldstein's ethnography reveals the determined efforts of street vendors—poor urban small-business people—to scrabble together a living against the odds in the only way available to them—as precarious owners of the streets and sidewalks of the informal city.



MAP 10.5
Cochabamba

Caste and Class in South Asia

Caste, like class, is a system of stratification. It organizes members of a culture into hierarchically ranked groups with unequal access to rewards and privileges. Caste is commonly, though incorrectly, considered a completely closed system of stratification with deep historical roots and rigidly enforced boundaries in which one's group status is inherited and assigned at birth. As we will see, however, caste also has characteristics of fluidity and change more commonly associated with other systems of class.

caste: A system of stratification most prominently found in South Asia in which status is determined by birth.

The most carefully described examples of caste exist among the populations of South Asia, including India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and other Himalayan regions. Descriptions of these caste systems often incorrectly trace their origins back 2,000 years to Hindu religious texts, rituals, and beliefs that divided the population into four *varnas*, or castes. Each caste, it is said, was associated with particular occupations and was ranked according to its purity in following Hindu ritual practices. *Brahmins* were scholars and spiritual leaders. *Ksyatriyas* served as soldiers and rulers. *Vaisyas* were agricultural workers and merchants. *Shudras* worked as laborers and artisans.

Visvamitra Visits Vasishtha's Hermitage, Kulu, Punjab Hills, 1700, depicts representatives of all four Hindu *varnas*, or castes: Vasishtha, the hermit *Brahmins*; Ksyatriyas, the soldier/rulers; *Vaisyas*, the agricultural workers/merchants; and *Shudras*, the laborers and artisans.

dalits: Members of India's "lowest" caste; literally, "broken people." Also called "Untouchables."

Completely outside and below these castes were other marginalized groups, including the "Untouchables," or *dalits* (literally, "broken people"). *Dalits* were assigned the most spiritually polluting work: cleaning latrines, collecting garbage, tanning leather. Social and religious stigma led to their physical separation from the rest of the community. They were considered so polluted that they were forbidden to use upper-class wells or temples. Members of the upper classes believed that simply touching a *dalit* would contaminate them; even touching a *dalit*'s shadow was considered unclean.

Despite the strong political mythology of the Hindu origins of caste, the system of *varnas* described in Hindu texts was largely theoretical, never widely operational. Practically, divisions within society were created around *jatis* (birth groups) drawn from many sources, including ethnic origins and occupations. Systems of caste have also functioned across religions, including Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian communities.

MAP 10.6
South Asia

Contemporary scholarship (Prashad 2001) explores a more complicated history of the Indian caste system than most textbooks present. Studies of local Indian communities suggest that caste has no uniform expression across India. The nation has an immense geographic range and a diverse population, with more than 4,600 distinct ethnic groups in a total population of over 1.2 billion people. In 1950, after independence from Britain, India's constitution officially recognized 1108 Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, officially designated groups of historically disadvantaged people in India. Patterns of stratification within those communities could not be traced to a uniform application of ancient Hindu ritual texts. Instead, patterns of stratification vary widely. Caste

Indian boys and men of the Untouchables, or *dalits*, work with hides in a lime pit at a tannery circa 1946.

has served not only as a cultural, religious, and political system but also as a structure for organizing economic exploitation (Srinivas 1962).

Although caste predates European expansion into India and British colonial rule, the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498 and later British colonial efforts radically reshaped the system and made it more rigid. Colonial land laws removed certain groups, particularly *dalits*, from their ancestral lands and put them to work as street sweepers and leather workers. Segregation of employment groups created a stereotyped version of caste relations. By replicating patterns of class that were prominent in England in the Indian caste system, the British colonial power reshaped Indian castes as a mechanism for administering the enormous colony and for extracting wealth generated there for the benefit of the British Empire (Prashad 2001).

India's caste system continues to change. Discrimination on the basis of caste is now illegal, having been outlawed in the constitution written after India gained independence in 1949. *Dalits* and other oppressed groups are now provided special protections and affirmative action programs to overcome the effects of centuries of exploitation. In the political realm, caste identity and consciousness have at times served to mobilize allies and votes. In 1997, India elected its first *dalit* president, K. R. Narayanan. Caste distinctions have been blurred, especially in some urban areas.

India's recent economic transformations have meant that new occupations and social mobility are undermining caste boundaries' power to maintain

This demonstration for women's rights and *dalit* rights in Bangalore, India, 2009, highlights the intersection of gender and caste.

a system of stratification. But the deep inequalities of the caste system persist, and changes are uneven. In public settings, caste boundaries are breaking down—for instance, in inter-caste dining. But in private—for instance, in arranged marriages—and particularly in rural areas, caste patterns remain strong. Moreover, the historical advantages of higher-caste groups have not been dismantled; this is especially evident in rural areas, where 68 percent of the population lives. Most of India's 201 million *dalits*—one-sixth of the population—are agricultural workers who live in poverty. Few live in cities. The vast majority are illiterate, and only a handful participate in the industrial workforce or in other Indian economic sectors (such as technology, telecommunications, and finance) that are becoming more integrated into the global economy.

From Caste to Class

As India and other countries have come to participate more fully in the global economy, certain economic sectors and certain regions of these countries, particularly urban areas, are seeing the hierarchy of caste shift toward a hierarchy of class, beginning a transition from a society organized by an **ascribed status** (assigned, usually at birth) to one organized by an **achieved status** (acquired). Yet despite these economic changes and *dalit*-led movements for civil rights at the local, regional, and even national levels, deeply rooted inequalities continue to preserve power and privilege for the upper classes while inhibiting most *dalits* and lower-caste members from participating fully in economic and social life (Deliege 2011; Guilmoto 2011).

ascribed status: A status assigned, usually at birth.

achieved status: A status acquired during one's lifetime.

Globally, the spread of globalization and worldwide market economies has been speeding the transition from caste systems to class systems, as we will see in the following case study from South Africa. After all, capitalism and the forces of globalization mean that workers must be able to move freely from place to place in response to changing economic conditions, and they have to be able to transition within professions to keep pace with changing jobs. The inflexibility of a closed caste system stands in stark contrast to and in direct conflict with the demands of the global economy. Thus, the rigidity of the caste-based, ascribed status hierarchy is gradually shifting to a class-based, achieved status system, though patterns of inequality remain extremely slow to change.

Race, Caste, and Class in South Africa

In South Africa between 1949 and 1991, a rigid, race-based caste system known as *apartheid* segregated people into four groups: Blacks, Indians (of Asian descent), Colored (mixed heritage), and Whites. Whites—only 15 percent of the population—controlled the country's economy, wealth, land, and government. The White government removed Blacks from 80 percent of the country and forcibly relocated them to restricted *bantustans* or homelands. Black mobility was carefully controlled through identity cards and travel permits. And, like African Americans in the Jim Crow southern United States, Blacks in South Africa were segregated into inferior schools, hospitals, bathrooms, and transportation and were not allowed to vote. Indian and Colored castes experienced less extreme discrimination but were denied equal rights with Whites. Through the system of apartheid, wealth moved steadily upward into the hands of the White elite.

MAP 10.7
Chatsworth

Decades of resistance to this systemic structural violence finally forced the White minority to end apartheid in 1992. Yet despite new constitutional guarantees of equal rights and the vote for all South Africans, the government made no attempt to address the economic inequalities built up over generations of exploitation. As a result, the extreme inequality of wealth and income created by the race-based caste system of apartheid continues to increase today.

Scholar-activist Ashwin Desai, in his book *We Are the Poors: Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (2002), documents a class-based movement to resist increasing inequality in Chatsworth township outside Durban. In the 1960s, the South African government forcibly relocated much of Durban's Indian population to Chatsworth, which they hoped would serve as a physical buffer between affluent White residential suburbs to the north and the large Black African township, Umlazi, to the south. Today, Chatsworth's Indian population includes the extremely poor, the middle class and the wealthy. But post-apartheid government economic policies that favor free markets, the privatization of public services, and greater integration into the global economy have

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THINGS

Landfills, Waste, and Social Inequality

We all encounter waste every day, whether it's our trash, old fast-food wrappers, or what goes into our toilet. But where does it go? Anthropologist Josh Reno (2016) worked for nine months in a sanitary landfill on the outskirts of Detroit, Michigan, to understand the social life of waste and the complex social relations of class and inequality it forms as it moves from production to consumption to disposal.

1 The United States generates more waste than any country in the world. Yet our system of mass waste removal is largely invisible. Landfills redistribute dangerous material from densely populated urban areas and concentrate it elsewhere, transferring the risk of leakage, pollution, contamination, and ill health to poor rural communities and communities of color. The construction of landfills transforms neighborhoods and ecosystems, remaking the surface of the Earth and endangering the surrounding air, water, and soil.

2 Waste disposal has become a measure of modernity all around the world. The availability of sanitation and clean water marks a clear distinction of class and status. In the United States, waste disposal is central to removing waste and signs of decay that can so easily intrude on middle-class expectations of order and cleanliness. Imagine the disorder and decay—and the damage to your social status—if you stopped taking out the trash or flushing the toilet for a few weeks.

3 Waste disposal involves a complex network of workers: trash collectors, recycling sorters, truckers, regulators, landfill managers, mechanics, bulldozer operators, and common landfill laborers. Waste workers are commonly stigmatized for their work with our garbage, but Reno challenges us to recognize them as essential care workers. By caring for mass waste—removing filth and decay—waste workers indirectly care for us, creating the conditions for cleanliness, health, and order.

If you follow the contents of your garbage bag, recycling bin, or toilet, they will lead you to people and places most of us never consider. A careful analysis of the social life of waste reveals connections often disguised and provides another insight into the complex web of social relationships in American culture.

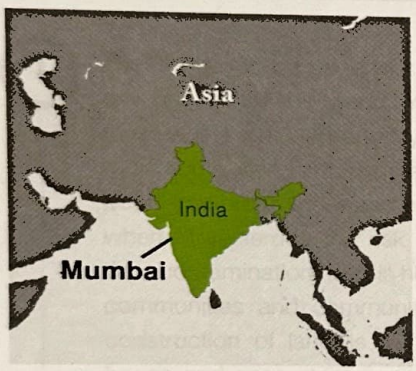
- Do you know where your trash goes?
- Do you know the hands your waste passes through from your home to the landfill, recycling station, or incinerator?
- Why do you think the waste removal system has been made almost invisible in the United States?

led to a significant loss of manufacturing jobs and the decline of the middle- and lower-class standard of living.

Poor residents in Chatsworth struggle to find work, to avoid foreclosure or eviction from their homes, and to access electricity and water as the government oversees a devastating wave of land speculation, deindustrialization, and privatization. During one eviction, local residents confronted the government official in charge. When he then accused them of seeking special privileges because they were Indian, an elderly woman, Girlie Amod, responded, "We are not Indians, we are the Poors." Recognizing their common class interests, poor residents have worked to build a social movement to combat Chatsworth's economic decline. Stratification in Chatsworth and throughout post-apartheid South Africa, Desai argues and documents, is no longer primarily based on color but is increasingly organized along class lines of the rich and "the poors."

Class and the Circulation of Water in Mumbai, India

Eight thousand miles from Flint, Michigan, poor people in Mumbai, India, also navigate a water crisis affecting the city's most marginalized communities. Sixty percent of Mumbai's 20.5 million people are poor urban settlers evicted from the city center or arriving from rural areas. Without permanent, legally recognized residences, these settlers have no legal right to access Mumbai's water. Anthropologist Nikhil Anand (2011a, 2011b, 2012) explores the strategies that Mumbai's poorest residents use to stake their claim to a hydraulic citizenship—a right to water—as they seek to make reliable homes for themselves and their families.



MAP 10.8
Mumbai

Purchasing bottled water as a private commodity is prohibitively expensive. So everyone must access Mumbai's municipal water in some fashion. With limited financial capital, Mumbai settlers mobilize social capital—relationships with friends, employers, clients, siblings, water officials, and fictive kin—to find points of access. They stage protests and write petitions. And they surreptitiously connect to public water mains late at night or early in the morning. Anand tells a story of accompanying a friend to connect to the water supply at 4:30 in the morning, waiting in a long line for his allotted water distribution. In the pre-dawn darkness, Anand's friend—a housekeeper at a luxury downtown hotel—tells a painfully ironic story of his own, recounting a recent request from his manager to turn off the tap of a guest who had left it running when he went out. Anand notes how class structures are made visible as poor Indian laborers travel across the city, passing shanties and luxury buildings, seeing poverty and wealth, and remembering having turned off a running hotel tap while standing in line for water. Urban infrastructure plays a key role in establishing these patterns of class stratification and inequality, structuring conditions of marginality and illegality into the relationships between citizen and state.

Who has a right to water? Settlement dwellers in Mumbai have found ways to resist the city's water rights, including through the illegal tapping of municipal pipes.

Cities are made possible by the circulation of water in city pipes. But what kind of a city? The complex assemblages of water pipes in Mumbai tell a story and enable an analysis of how marginality is created. Here we see not the marginality of the rural poor living on the edges of national and international economic activity but marginality at the center of the nation-state, in India's largest city and through its most essential matter—water. Relations of power come into focus as Anand traces the circulation of Mumbai's water. The municipal water system returns a hefty profit to the city, yet its managers and political decision makers are unable to provide a steady and safe supply to settlement dwellers—its most vulnerable population. What is citizenship if it does not include the right to water? Does disconnection of water mean disconnection of citizenship? Anand's research offers insights into the creative, persistent, informal, and even illegal strategies that Mumbai's poor settlement dwellers use to resist the city's water rules and to renegotiate the terms of their hydraulic citizenship in the face of an infrastructure managed to create and reinforce conditions of class stratification and inequality.

Thinking Globally about Inequality

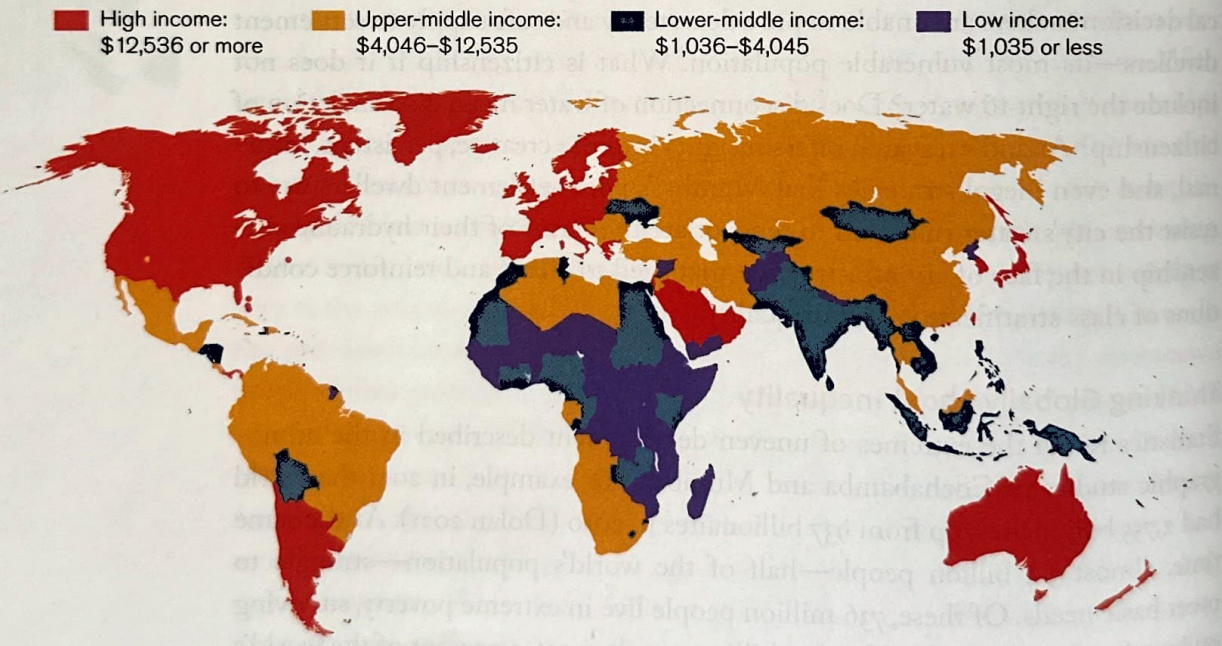
Statistics reveal the extremes of uneven development described in the ethnographic studies of Cochabamba and Mumbai. For example, in 2021 the world had 2,755 billionaires, up from 937 billionaires in 2010 (Dolan 2021). At the same time, almost 3.4 billion people—half of the world's population—struggle to meet basic needs. Of these, 736 million people live in extreme poverty, surviving on less than $1.90 each day. Nearly 2 billion people, or 26.2 percent of the world's population, live on less than $3.20 per day, which is considered the poverty rate in

lower-middle-income countries (World Bank 2018). If household wealth were divided equally on a global basis, each household would have $26,754 (using 2000 data). Instead, 10 percent of the world's population owns 71 percent of all wealth on the entire planet. The wealthiest 20 percent of the world's population receives 75 percent of the total global income (Davies et al. 2009).

The World Bank classifies countries as high income ($12,536 or more per person), upper middle income ($4,046 to $12,535), lower middle income ($1,036 to $4,045), or low income ($1,035 or less; Figure 10.3). The gap between rich and poor countries has grown in recent years and continues to widen, as has inequality within most countries. Even the poorest countries have an elite organized around political, economic, or military power. And in the richest countries, as we have seen in the United States, an increasing number of people are living in poverty. What does this mean in concrete terms?

Growing global inequality affects the life chances of the world's population on many fronts, including hunger and malnutrition, health, education, vulnerability to climate change, and access to technology. Hunger is indeed a global problem. Although there is enough food in the world to feed everyone, it is unevenly distributed. Every day, 821 million people go hungry—one out of every nine—and 150 million children under age five are malnourished (World Health Organization 2018).

FIGURE 10.3 THE WORLD BY GROSS NATIONAL INCOME PER CAPITA, 2020



SOURCE: *The World Bank. 2020. World by Income and Region. datatopics.worldbank.org.*

Health and mortality are also areas of serious concern. In late 2021, the number of COVID-19 vaccine doses administered per one hundred people was eighteen times higher in high-income countries than in low-income countries. (Anderson and Wakamo 2021). Preventable infectious diseases such as malaria, measles, and HIV/AIDS kill millions each year in poor countries. And in low-income countries, people are more likely to die in infancy and are eleven times more likely to die at birth than are people in wealthy countries. Moreover, people live longer in high-income countries, averaging a nearly eighty-one-year life span compared to a nearly sixty-three-year life span in low-income countries (World Health Organization 2019).

Access to education, a gateway to economic advancement, is also uneven. Basic literacy varies widely between high- and low-income countries. In addition, the digital divide prevents the majority of the world's inhabitants from participating in technological advances that are transforming the world's economy.

Climate change also affects the rich and poor unequally. Those with financial and political resources can buy safety, living outside areas that are vulnerable to natural disasters. A recent example from the United States underscores this point: Anthropologist Neil Smith (2006), when examining the effects of Hurricane Katrina on the people of New Orleans, called it an "unnatural disaster" because the storm's most severe effects were caused by the government's failure to adequately build and maintain the city's levee system—not by the storm itself. New Orleans residents experienced Katrina's effects unevenly along lines of class as well as race and gender.

Throughout this chapter, we have explored the complexity of class stratification and inequality both within the United States and globally. Despite the centrality of class-based stratification in the dynamics of globalization and its powerful effects on individuals' life chances and possibilities for social mobility, class remains arguably the most overlooked of the systems of power we have considered in this textbook. Careful attention to the theoretical approaches to class adopted by anthropologists, including ethnographic research and data analysis, will position you to engage issues of income and wealth inequality more fully as you participate in a rapidly globalizing world.

Thinking Like an Anthropologist: The Dynamics of Class through Water and Beyond

In our chapter-opening story, we began to tease out the dynamics of class through the story of the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. Water is essential to human life. Humans need a steady supply of quality water every day. Yet people in Flint, and others around the globe, struggle to gain access to safe and abundant water. What is for many in the United States an afterthought—a drink of water—has become one of the most highly contentious issues of our time. What is too often thought of as a natural process—the circulation of water—has now become a hydro-social process, shaped and determined not only by rainfall and topography but also increasingly by infrastructure, technological skills, and political decision makers. And as we have seen in this chapter, in Flint and Mumbai, inequalities in the distribution of water often map directly onto inequalities in class, race, gender, and ethnicity.

Having read this chapter, you are now better prepared to analyze the water crisis in Flint through the lens of class. For underneath the decision to switch water supplies, the orange-brown water, and the corroded pipes lies a set of unequal relationships. And these differences—starkly revealed by the health consequences of water management decisions—translate into significantly different access to services, resources, and life chances. Our discussion in this chapter has expanded from Flint's water crisis to explore the following questions:

- Is inequality a natural part of human culture?
- How do anthropologists analyze class and inequality?
- How are class and inequality constructed in the United States?
- How are class and inequality constructed globally?

The COVID-19 pandemic has also exposed deep lines of class and inequality, both in the United States and globally. As we will discuss in Chapter 16, "Health, Illness, and the Body," critical medical anthropologists document how health mirrors wealth and power. Unequal health systems create unequal health outcomes between and within countries as they intersect with other systems of power, such as those based on class, race, gender, sexuality, citizenship, and age. As you reflect on the discussions in this chapter, how would you use these tools to analyze the COVID-19 pandemic?

As systems of class stratification create widening inequality in many arenas, your ability to perceive, analyze, and discuss class will become increasingly important. Class affects life chances in almost all realms of culture, including infrastructure, the restaurant industry, universities and other elements of the education system, health care, religious organizations, housing, government services, and many others that you can identify. How do these systems of class and inequality affect your own life chances and those of the people closest to you? As you consider these issues, you may be motivated to engage in efforts to reshape systems of inequality. Certainly, as you prepare for a career in the global economy and a life in this global age, being able to analyze the effects of class and inequality will be an essential tool in your anthropological toolkit.

Key Terms

class (p. 357)
stratification (p. 358)
egalitarian society (p. 358)
reciprocity (p. 358)
ranked society (p. 360)
redistribution (p. 360)
potlatch (p. 360)
bourgeoisie (p. 362)

means of production (p. 362)
capital (p. 362)
proletariat (p. 362)
prestige (p. 364)
life chances (p. 364)
social mobility (p. 365)
social reproduction (p. 365)
habitus (p. 365)
cultural capital (p. 365)
intersectionality (p. 367)
income (p. 378)
wealth (p. 379)
caste (p. 387)
dalits (p. 388)
ascribed status (p. 390)
achieved status (p. 390)

For Further Exploration

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